

## Let's Be One Another's Present Tense by ohmybgosh

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**Summary:**

Steve's having trouble stepping in the water and Billy helps him out

## Let's Be One Another's Present Tense

### Author's Note:

Anon prompt: "Billy finding Steve crying and just sitting there awkwardly trying to comfort him, until finally he hugs Steve and blushes as he mumbles, "Tell anyone and you're dead" but Steve takes it and just clings to him??? Like fluffy awkwardness for Billy tryna comfort his pretty boy?"

Love this prompt thank you!

Inspired by this beautiful [art](#)

The title is from the song Crater Lake by Lady Lamb  
<3

It was one of those nights where it took a great deal of effort to remember how to breathe. It wasn't the quality of the air; May had come that week with warm golden sun and clear spring breezes that smelled like green grass. It wasn't his asthma either; it wasn't physical, and he had medicine for asthma. No, it was the anxiety.

It was always there, always a part of Steve, but ever since November he'd been having panic attacks, with more and more frequency the closer he got to graduation.

He learned how to deal with them. For him: curl up somewhere with walls on all sides, put his headphones on and play his mom's classical selection on repeat, and focus on breathing, breathing until his body stopped shaking and his eyes went dry.

He hated that he was doing it to himself this particular night.

Steve was outside, sitting on the edge of the pool, knees curled into his chest, toes inches from the warm, clear water. He closed his eyes. He was afraid to look. He tried to breathe slowly, counting to four with each inhale and exhale.

Billy currently stood in Steve's kitchen, humming to himself and

browsing through Steve's parents alcohol cabinet.

Billy had been hanging out at Steve's a lot now. They stayed mostly in Steve's room when his parents were home. Steve ended up cross legged on his bed, struggling through an essay or taking his time with Calc homework, while Billy lay face up on the bed beside him with Steve's headphones over his ears and Walkman on, sometimes offering help, but more often than not poking Steve with a pencil when he needed attention, or jumping up and wandering around Steve's room when he got bored, opening drawers and sifting through Steve's clothes, pulling out a polo or a sweater at random and holding it up to himself, saying "Whaddya think, Harrington?", to which Steve replied, glancing up from his homework, "Nah, you can't pull it off."

The handful of nights Steve's parents weren't home, out for a date or away for business, they raided the liquor cabinet and camped out on the couch. These nights were Steve's favorite, because when he and Billy got drunk there were no more walls. He felt like he could tell Billy almost anything, even about how lost he felt without Nancy, and how after she was gone he realized he'd never felt *found* his whole life.

On these nights Billy talked about California. If he drank enough he talked about being a little kid, about his mom and his dad. Steve loved the sound of Billy's voice when he talked about his childhood. It rose a bit in pitch, and sounded soft around the edges. His eyes got watery when he talked about his mom and how his dad used to be. Steve, dizzy and confident from the alcohol, stretched across the couch and lay his head on Billy's lap in these moments.

When they were sober Billy didn't like Steve touching him, swatting at Steve when Steve absentmindedly put a hand on his shoulder, shrinking away when their thighs brushed, Billy's face going pink and a scowl in his eyes. These nights, though, he didn't push Steve away. He would run his fingers through Steve's hair, draw circles on Steve's back, or just rest his hands on Steve's stomach, letting Steve reach down to hold them.

This particular night Steve didn't want to be touched, though. Part of him wished Billy stayed home. But then, that wasn't fair.

They'd been doing this for a few months now, hanging out with each other, mostly because, funnily enough, Billy was the only person Steve was comfortable around anymore, apart from Dustin. But he couldn't drink a beer with Dustin, and he loved the kid but sometimes Dustin just talked so fast and it was tiring to keep up. Billy seemed to enjoy being around Steve, too. He loved antagonizing Steve, to the point where Steve felt a migraine coming on, but he also seemed to really enjoy Steve's company, a strange smile on his face Steve was still getting used to. And sometimes Steve caught Billy looking at him, dazedly, as if he wasn't sure Steve was really there.

Steve cracked his eyes open. The pool light winked at him; the water's surface rippled in the wind.

Barb died at the bottom of his pool.

He asked Hopper once if he found Barb when he and Joyce saved Will. Hopper gave him a long look, then said darkly, "You don't need to know about that."

His breathing became more labored. He tried to inhale, *one, two, three* - his throat closed up. Exhale. *Four, three, two* . His eyes burned.

Steve couldn't even remember caring about Barb that night, that first night with Nancy.

Nancy. His heart hurt. He cared only about Nancy for so long; he wanted to marry her. He knew now he had been stupid - had he ever asked if she wanted to marry him?

Nancy was so much stronger than him. He relied on her too much.

Tears spilled over and he rubbed his eyes angrily. Don't cry in front of Billy.

Inhale. *One, two* -

He heard the screen door slide open and Billy's voice. "Ok, Harrington, I tried to make you a Tequila Sunrise since you like the fruity stuff, but it just looks like a Bloody Mary."

Steve heard Billy's bare feet against the tile. He tensed.

“Harrington?” Billy stopped beside him. Steve tried to speak, tried to croak “go away” but no words came out, just a small, strangled sort of sound.

“Harrington?” Billy said again, a touch of panic in his voice, and then, crouching down, “Steve?”

Steve hid his face on his knees, but he wasn’t quick enough; Billy saw.

“Oh,” Billy murmured. “Ah...” His voice rose in pitch, like when he talked about his parents. He stayed like that for a minute, awkward and unsure. Steve tried to count his breaths but he couldn’t, not when Billy stared at him, not when he tried to swallow down the sob building at the back of his throat.

After a long moment he heard Billy shift, the clink of the glasses being set on the tile and Billy sitting beside Steve, rolling up his pant legs and the splash of his feet dangling in the water.

“Steve,” he said again, high but soft. Steve felt Billy’s arm around his shoulders, cautious, almost hovering over his skin.

It all came crashing then. Steve couldn’t hold it in anymore; it was like the floodgates burst open and the water pounded through, muddy, with the force of a thousand elephants, and carrying all the debris he’d hidden deep down inside of himself.

He clung to Billy. He wrapped his arms around Billy’s neck and sobbed into his shoulder. Steve knew he was an ugly crier; his eyes got red and puffy and his nose runny, but he didn’t have an energy left to care about that.

Billy didn’t seem to care either. He pulled Steve in close, resting his chin on Steve’s head, whispering something softly, something Steve couldn’t hear until he took in a ragged breath.

“It’s ok, I’m here, it’s ok,” he murmured, repeating it like a mantra. In the back of his mind Steve wondered if it was from something Billy heard when he was very small, from one of those precious memories he only shared when he drank too much.

After several moments Steve caught his breath and his eyes felt as if they'd been cried out. They stayed like that for another minute, Billy going quiet but pushing Steve's hair back where it fell across his forehead.

Steve felt Billy's heartbeat under his hand, which had slipped slightly from Billy's shoulder. It beat fast, faster than Steve's. His skin was so warm; he smelled strangely sweet, like honey.

Steve tilted his head up, his cheek resting against Billy's shoulder, to glance at Billy.

Billy gazed down at him with that dazed look in his eyes. He blinked and shook his head slightly. His face hardened just the tiniest bit and leaned away, ducking out of Steve's grasp.

Steve straightened, swallowing. His skin tingled and he felt chilly, missing Billy's arms around him.

Billy picked up his own glass, dark brown; it looked like Jack and Coke. He swirled it around, taking a big sip.

He licked his lips and glanced at Steve. "Tell anyone about this and you're dead, Harrington."

Steve smiled slowly; Billy was the only one he shared things like this with. But he nodded all the same. "Ok."

Satisfied, Billy held out Steve's glass for him.

Billy was right, if it was anything it was an eclipse, not a sunrise. Steve took a sip and wrinkled his nose - it tasted too strong, but perhaps the extra tequila was a good thing tonight.

"It's good," he said hoarsely.

Billy narrowed his eyes at him. "You're lying."

"No!" Steve took another sip, swallowing with difficulty, and smiled though his throat burned. "It's perfect."

Billy shrugged and finished the rest of his drink in two gulps. He set

his empty glass on the ground and jumped up suddenly, shimmying out of his jeans, hoisting himself up with no warning and hurdling into the pool.

Steve raised his arms, covering his face as the splash hit him, sloshing his drink.

Billy popped out of the water, grinning, smoothing his long hair back.

“You gotta come in here.”

“No, thanks, I’m fine up here.” Steve scooted back a few inches.

“I wanna show you something.” Billy swam to edge, arms resting on the side, hands reaching for Steve’s ankles.

“I don’t believe you.” Steve squirmed when Billy grabbed his ankles, dragging him to the edge of the pool so he was knee deep. Steve sucked in a deep breath.

“Put the glass down or it’s coming with you,” Billy warned, muscles tensing. Scrambling, Steve set the glass down and Billy yanked him in.

Steve flailed, yelping and squeezing his eyes shut. The water shocked him and grabbed the first thing he found, clinging tightly to Billy’s neck, wrapping his legs around Billy’s waist.

“Jesus,” Billy wheezed. He pried Steve’s fingers open and Steve loosened his grip. He cracked his eyes open, holding his breath.

It...wasn’t terrible. The pool was just a pool. He could see the bottom. He tentatively reached down and skimmed his fingers over the surface.

“Ok?” Billy asked. He still held Steve, mostly above the water. Steve was taller, by an inch - he liked to remind Billy, which he thought was funny but Billy did not - and Steve wasn’t weak - he was kind of proud of his basketball muscles. But Billy was stronger than him and he held Steve with ease. Steve thought he could lift Billy, but he might struggle a bit.

He turned to face Billy. Their noses brushed and Billy's cheeks colored.

"I'm ok," Steve said. He felt his own face warming. "Um, you can put me down now."

"Sorry." Billy let go, taking a step back.

He glanced down at the water, long hair hiding his face. For a moment Steve thought he was closing himself off, as he always did, but then Billy looked up, grinning. Steve had a half-second to brace himself before Billy splashed him.

Sputtering, Steve rubbed his eyes. "Hey!"

"Come on!" Billy splashed him again and swam off across the pool.

Smiling slightly, Steve followed.